



December 2002/January 2003

Paradise Not Lost

Protecting Southwest Florida's resources

The land and water west of Lake Okeechobee and south of Sarasota has some of the most perfectly preserved natural systems in the world. Cypress and mangrove swamps carry us back to a prehistoric time, to natural ecosystems that have changed little since the first Native Americans came upon this land. Flora and fauna like the ancient bald cypress, red and black mangrove forests, xeric oak hammocks, and pine flatwoods are home to panthers, alligators, manatees and a host of wading birds that exist today much as they did when the first inhabitants of this area, the Calusa, arrived some 6,000 years ago.

While the Calusa civilization that once thrived here is gone, Southwest Florida remains one of the state's fastest-growing areas, drawing hundreds of thousands of new residents from places such as Ohio, Michigan, Illinois and Germany. New people are lured by the subtropical climate, miles of white sandy beaches and the natural systems that have existed here since the beginning of recorded time. As Southwest Florida continues to grow, and millions more settle in this fragile ecosystem, regional and local governments are working to protect the area's environmental integrity while providing essential water supplies and flood control.

Finding a balance between growth – which fuels the economy – and resource protection and preservation poses very real challenges.

The South Florida Water Management District has long recognized the unique

needs and characteristics of the state's lower west coast communities. The 16-county agency established its first satellite service center in Fort Myers in 1981. Over the years, local staffing and programs have grown significantly in response to the region's needs.

"We have to work both smarter and harder to keep up with the increase in demands and to ensure preservation of the irreplaceable ecosystem that is Southwest Florida," Carol Wehle, director of the SFWMD Greater West Coast region, said. "We are working with all levels of government, interest groups, the business community and the public to actively identify and address regional issues and concerns."

THINK GLOBALLY

A comprehensive study to look at the needs of the west coast region – similar to, and in conjunction with, the broad-

based perspective taken with the Everglades – is now under way. The Southwest Florida Feasibility Study, a cooperative project between the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the District has a number of objectives:

- Conserving and protecting water resources in Southwest Florida;
- Ensuring that environmental, agricultural and urban water supplies are maintained;
- Improving and protecting the ecological viability of natural ecosystems;
- Improving water flows throughout the natural system;
- Protecting and improving water quality throughout the region;
- Protecting and recovering populations of threatened species;
- Reducing flood damages to the region.

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